Pope appoints former undocumented immigrant as bishop of West Virginia

Leo, who has criticized Trump's hardline immigration policy, selected Evelio Menjivar-Ayala as state's new bishop

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Pope Leo XIV has appointed a man who had once entered the United States as an undocumented immigrant, hidden in the trunk of a car, as the new bishop of West Virginia.

The pope approved the resignation of Bishop Mark E Brennan of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, and selected Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala, 55, of Washington to take his place, reported OSV News.

Bishop Menjivar-Ayala moved to the US in 1990. In 2023, he became the first Salvadorian bishop in the country, serving as an auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of Washington. Considered among the first US bishops born in Central America, he has spoken publicly urging Catholics to oppose Donald Trump's aggressive policies toward immigrants, according to the Washington Post.

Menjivar-Ayala said he accepted his new role "with great joy and humility" at a Friday-morning news conference.

Born on 14 August 1970, in Chalatenango, El Salvador, Menjivar-Ayala's journey to the priesthood began in the violence of the Salvadorian civil war, where he and his family narrowly survived being fired upon by soldiers while fleeing their home, he previously told the Catholic Standard. After two failed attempts to reach the US, hindered by deportation and a guide who deserted the migrant group, he finally succeeded on his third try, despite a brief imprisonment in Mexico and a grueling desert crossing.

Recalling his voyage to the US, he described bringing "a backpack with only one change of clothes, but it was full of dreams, of illusions that sometimes we do not understand. That dream is a light that guides you and, although you don't understand the plan, you launch yourself with confidence in God."

Once settled, Menjivar-Ayala prioritized his education by learning English and earning a GED. He worked janitorial and construction jobs before answering a religious calling at a local parish in Silver Spring, Maryland, to begin his studies for the priesthood.

"We are partners in mission," he told Catholics at the press conference, adding he also wanted to listen to the ideas of young people - "you are not only the future of the church, you are the present of the church," he said - and to the poor, workers and immigrants. He also expressed his gratitude towards the "first American pope" for his appointment.

Pope Leo has previously voiced criticism of the Trump administration's handling of migrants.

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"How did you receive the foreigner, did you receive him and welcome him, or not? I think there is a deep reflection that needs to be made about what is happening," Pope Leo told reporters when asked about current US immigration policies, adding he believed that foreigners in the US were being treated in an "extremely disrespectful way".

In a Truth Social post last month, Trump described Pope Leo as "WEAK on Crime, and terrible for Foreign Policy".